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ABSTRACT

The years between childhood and adulthood are full of new experiences and new challenges. This guide is designed to help young people and adults participate in a study circle on youth issues. The study circles, which are small-group, democratic, peer-led discussions, offer a way for participants to work together as full partners in community problem solving. Study circles are designed to enable the kind of genuine, productive dialogue that allows people to hear from others with different experiences and views. This booklet presents a number of key community issues involving youth, and encourages readers to consider a range of ideas and viewpoints. Ground rules for making discussion more productive, such as respectful listening, are listed in the back of the guide. Four sessions are outlined. The first session explores what it is like to be young and includes exercises for sharing personal experiences and perceptions. Session two outlines ways to make the community a better place for young people while session three looks at specific community issues, such as racial and ethnic tensions, violence, dating, and substance abuse. The last session, "Making a Difference," presents ideas and suggestions for implementing positive steps in addressing youth issues in the community. (RJM)

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# The Busy Citizen's Discussion Guide:

# Youth Issues, Youth Voices

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This booklet is an abbreviated version of ***Youth Issues, Youth Voices: A Guide for Engaging Youth and Adults in Public Dialogue and Problem Solving***, available for $5.00 plus $2.00 per order from shipping and handling, from the Study Circles Resource Center.

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## Foreword

# Why bring young people and adults together for public dialogue?

Some of today's toughest issues—from crime to racial tension to substance abuse—directly involve and affect young people. But too often youth are absent from the community discussions on these issues. This guide can help create opportunities for young people and adults to talk together candidly about youth issues, to develop new ideas, and to work together to implement change.

This brief guide is not just to read, it is to use. It is designed to help you as you participate in a study circle on youth issues. In study circles—small-group, democratic, peer-led discussions—young people and adults can work together as full partners in community problem solving. Study circles enable the kind of genuine, productive dialogue that allows people to hear from those with different experiences and views.

This booklet presents a number of key community issues involving youth, and encourages you to consider a range of ideas and viewpoints. The inside back cover provides ground rules for making your discussions more productive: respectful listening, open exploration of the experiences and beliefs behind opinions, and careful consideration of others' views.

### Involving the whole community

Until recently, young people have had little opportunity to have a "voice" in the public issues that affect and involve them. Now that is beginning to change, as youth professionals and others recognize that it is essential for young people themselves to have a "place at the table." As young people and adults come together in this collaborative and democratic way, they are taking an important first step in working together on the wide range of youth issues facing communities across the country. They are also creating intergenerational relationships, strengthening the community, and learning the skills of active citizenship and community problem solving.

***"Youth Issues, Youth Voices"*** contains several suggestions for ways young people and adults can work together for change. Where this has already begun, young people have joined the efforts of community organizations to make a real difference at the community level. To deal with today's issues, our communities need the involvement, energy, creativity, talent, and caring of *every* citizen, and that includes young people.

## Introduction

# A challenging and exciting time for young people

The years between childhood and adulthood are full of new experiences and new challenges. Relationships with parents change, friends and friendships become more important, school is more challenging, responsibilities increase, and life gets more complex. It's also in these years that young people can begin to take an active role in their communities.

The challenges facing today's young people are different from those their parents faced. People who live in the same neighborhood, sometimes even on the same block, don't know each other like they used to. Families are under more stress, often with a single parent, or with two working parents. Many institutions that used to support families and youth aren't as strong as they used to be. And young people hear conflicting messages about relationships, behavior, and values.

More than ever, roles and expectations for young people are unclear. Who has authority over what? How much independence should a young person have? How much responsibility? What rights or privileges? What obligations? In an increasingly complex world, young people need to know where to turn.

Here are some problems and trends affecting teens in the U.S. today:

- ***Changing family patterns.*** Nationally, the number of families headed by a single parent has increased from 22 percent in 1985 to 26 percent in 1993, a situation which often increases economic and other hardships (*1996 Kids Count Data Book*).
- ***Poverty.*** In 1974, 10.2 million American children lived below the poverty level. In 1994, that number had risen to well over 15 million (*1996 Kids Count Data Book*). This includes 5.6 million children whose parents cannot earn enough, even if they are working full time, to escape poverty.
- ***Violence.*** There has been a dramatic increase in the number of young people who are victims or perpetrators of violent crime. Also, youth are involved in crime at younger and younger ages. Violence is now the second-most frequent cause of death for youth (after motor vehicle accidents), with firearms involved in one of every four deaths among people ages 15-19 (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, May 1996). Violent death among teens increased by 10%

from 1985 to 1993, including a homicide rate which doubled (*1996 Kids Count Data Book*). "Youth violence," said Attorney General Janet Reno, "is the greatest single crime problem in America today."

- ***Conflict between racial and ethnic groups.*** In many communities and high schools, there is growing tension among youth of different racial and ethnic groups. This is a reflection of what is taking place in the whole society. Segregation, tensions, and misperceptions between whites and people of color are growing. There are also growing tensions *among* ethnic minority groups (The National Conference Survey on Inter-Group Relations, 1995).
- ***Dating violence and date rape.*** One out of three teenage girls in a dating relationship in high school is physically or sexually abused (*Helping Teens Stop Violence*, 1990).
- ***Substance abuse.*** After a decline in drug use in the 1980s, teenage use of illicit drugs, tobacco, and alcohol is on the rise again. Marijuana use by young people aged 12-17 is up from 6 percent in 1994 to 8.2 percent in 1995. Marijuana users are more likely to use other drugs, and less likely to achieve academically. There were 10 million alcohol drinkers under age 21 in 1995. Of these, 4.4 million were binge drinkers (1996 Household Survey on Drug Abuse).
- ***Lack of economic opportunity.*** It's harder to find good jobs that pay a living wage. In the late 1960s, a full-time job that paid minimum wage could keep a family of three out of poverty. In 1994, the same working adult earned only 70 percent of the income needed to lift a family of three out of poverty (*1996 Kids Count Data Book*). These economic realities are even worse for those who have only a high school education.
- ***Teen pregnancy.*** Rates of teen pregnancy have tripled in the last 30 years. Also, ***sexually-transmitted diseases***, particularly AIDS, are much higher for the 15- to 25-year-old age group than a decade ago (Centers for Disease Control, Information Hotline, 1996).

Despite these challenges, there is strong reason for hope. There are more chances than ever for young people to take charge of their lives, to be leaders, to get involved in public life, and to help solve the problems that affect them. In many communities, programs have been developed to tap the leadership potential of young people and empower them to help bring about positive change.

To deal with today's issues, our communities need the involvement, energy, creativity, talent, and caring of *every* citizen, and that includes young people.

## Session 1

# What is it like to be young? Sharing personal experiences and perceptions

The purpose of this session is for you to share your thoughts about being young, and to learn what your community is like for young people. By getting to know each other, you will begin to build the trust you need to look at some of the tough issues in the rest of our discussions.

### Activity #1

Pair up with someone you don't know very well, and interview your partner for three minutes. Find out three things about your partner that you can't tell just from appearance. Then switch. When the whole group comes back together, the partners will introduce one another to the group.

### Activity #2

The leader will help the group set its own ground rules for discussion. Refer the group to "Ground rules for useful discussions" on the inside back cover of this publication. See also "A comparison of dialogue and debate" on page 27 of this publication.

### Discussion questions

1. What's good about being young? What's difficult about it? [If you are an adult, what are your strongest memories about being young? How did your experiences growing up shape what you want for young people today?]
2. What is our community like for young people? [Here, "community" could refer to the school, the neighborhood, or even the entire city.]
3. In this community, how do kids and adults get along? Have you been able to get to know someone from another generation who isn't a family member?
4. What is your background? [When you answer this, think about your racial or ethnic group, your religion or other ways you describe yourself.] How does your background affect how you see yourself and

how other young people and adults see you? How do you make up your mind about other people?

5. Do kids in this community belong to different groups? How do you feel about this? How does it affect your life? Do you know how the adults in your life feel about the groups you belong to? [If you are an adult, tell us how belonging or not belonging to different groups affected your life when you were young.]

6. What rights should a young person have? What responsibilities? How should that be decided? How do those rights and responsibilities change with age?

# Ice Breaker Exercise

Think about what it is like (or was like, or will be like) being 16 years old — the setting, the times, the feelings. Take a few minutes to answer these questions about yourself at age 16.

Break into small groups of 2 to 4 people and share your answers. Then, with the whole group, move on to the discussion questions.

1. The year is _____ .
2. I live in _____ (city/town), _____ (state), population _____ (approximate) .
3. I go to _____ .
4. I'm good at _____ .
5. Signs of the times (social/political) include _____ .
6. After school/work, I hang out at _____ .
7. My friends and I eat and drink _____ .
8. Today, I'm wearing _____ .
9. For fun, I _____ .
10. The music I listen to is telling me to _____ .
11. I'm worried about what will happen to me if _____ .
12. My parents most often give me advice about _____ .
13. I'm getting lots of pressure to _____ .
14. One thing I really don't understand is _____ .
15. One thing I feel proud about is _____ .
16. My plans for the future include _____ .

*Adapted from* Sixteen Candles, *an exercise developed by Mary Doyen of the Rocky Mountain Center for Health Promotion and Education in Lakewood, CO and Phyllis Scattergood of the Education Development Center in Newton, MA.*

## Session 2

# How can we make our community a better place for young people?

The purpose of this session is to look at our "community" (however we are defining that for our discussions — our school, neighborhood, or whole city) from the point of view of young people. We'll have the chance to think about what we'd like to improve, and how we could go about making our community a better place for young people.

### Activity #1

Begin by having each person write down answers to the following questions: "When you think of your community, what are you having trouble with? What are you worried about? What do you feel good about?"

After a few minutes, ask members to share with the group, and record the information. This will help the group build a picture of the community as it is now.

***Discussion questions***

1. What do you think are the main issues, problems, and challenges that kids in our community are facing? Why do you think these problems exist here?
2. Are there people in the community who aren't in this discussion who would identify other problems or concerns?
3. Do you think our community is different from other communities in our area? In the nation?
4. What is going well in the community? What activities in the community are making a positive difference in your life? What else could we do?
5. What are kids contributing to our community now? What else might they do?
6. Do you know about things being done in other communities that might be useful for us?

## Activity #2

Do a group brainstorming exercise where members respond to the following: "It is the year 2005. This community (school, neighborhood, city) is a wonderful place for young people to be and grow up. What does it look like? How do things work?"

Record the group's vision for the future.

***Discussion questions***

1. In what ways is our future picture of the community different from today?
2. What would need to happen to make the changes?
3. What roles could young people play in changing the community?

## Session 3 — Looking at specific community issues

On the following pages you will find suggestions for discussion sessions on four different issues. On any one issue, you may need to meet more than once to complete your discussion.

**Session 3a — How can we deal with racial and ethnic tensions?** ..... 10

**Session 3b — How can we reduce violence and make the community a safer place?** ..... 14

**Session 3c — How can we promote healthy and responsible dating relationships?** ..... 17

**Session 3d — How can we deal with substance abuse?** ..... 21

If your group wants to talk about an issue that isn't covered in this guide, use Sessions 3a-3d as models for developing your own material. Find articles from a local newspaper, make an outline, or develop a list of questions to guide the discussion. As part of the study circle, encourage group members to bring in materials on the issue. Try to make sure the material covers a broad range of viewpoints.

## Session 3a

# How can we deal with racial and ethnic tensions?

### *What some kids are saying*

- ✓ *"Our school has kids from lots of different cultures, but we don't mix much except in classes. How come at lunch and after school the majority of us hang out with our own group?"*
- ✓ *"Racial problems come from a lack of respect. I mean, an African American does not respect a Latino in his own community, a Latino does not respect an Asian, an Asian does not respect an African American."*
- ✓ *"The only way that we're going to come together is if we all learn about each other's past. Because if you don't know about me, and I don't know about you, there's still going to be some kind of prejudice in our minds."*

Tension among different racial and ethnic groups is a real problem in communities across the country. It affects whether we can get along, in school or out in the community. It can affect our daily lives in many ways — from whether we respect each other, to how we treat each other, to how we deal with conflict. When racial tensions go unresolved, they often lead to violence.

Sometimes racial tension gets further complicated by other differences: we form groups that include some people (and exclude others) because of the way we dress, the way we live, or where we come from.

The purpose of this session is to help us talk about racial and ethnic tensions and what we can do about them.

### Five viewpoints

How can we reduce tension and improve relationships between racial and ethnic groups? Here are five ways to address this problem.

**Viewpoint #1 — We need to confront racism head-on.** We need to examine our personal attitudes, change them, and move beyond them. Every young person should take part in anti-racism and prejudice

reduction programs. To confront societal racism, sometimes we need to give extra privileges to members of groups that have been the victims of racism.

**Viewpoint #2 — We should work together on common projects.** When kids of different racial groups work together on community projects, they make friends and racial tensions begin to disappear. Church groups, school clubs, team sports, and community service projects can offer the chance to have one-on-one relationships with people of different races.

**Viewpoint #3 — We should treat everyone the same regardless of their race.** In our attitudes, we should always look at the content of someone's character, not the color of the person's skin. In our policies, we shouldn't give certain groups special privileges. To be fair, the rules should be the same for everybody. When some groups have special privileges, it creates

**Why do we have racial tension? Some different ideas**

- **Racism is everywhere in America.** Racism — the belief that some people are better than others because of skin color, and the power structures that are built on that belief — is a fact of life in our country. Young people are reflecting and becoming a part of the culture they're growing up in.

- **Racial tension is getting worse because some minorities portray white people as the "enemy."** That kind of attitude inflames racial conflicts.

- **Racial tension comes from misunderstanding and fear about people who are different.** Since people of different racial groups don't have many chances to get to know each other, it is easy to believe common stereotypes.

- **Racial tension gets worse because some people are defensive and overly sensitive.** People in racial minorities can get into a "victim mindset" and see every problem as related to race.

- **Racial tension is increasing because it's harder to get ahead.** It's tough for anyone to "make it" in our system, but it's tougher still for people of color. Tensions and frustrations between groups are a natural consequence of this competition.

*Of these reasons, is there one or more that you agree with? Why? Is anything left out?*

resentment and even more problems.

**Viewpoint #4 — People of *all* ages and races need to work together on racial problems.** The education of young people is important, but it will never be enough. Adults have to be a part of the discussion of racism and racial tensions, and have to be willing to make changes, too.

**Viewpoint #5 — We need more chances to learn about each other.** Stereotypes break down when young people become knowledgeable about different cultures and traditions. Community, church, or school events which celebrate different cultures can promote trust, understanding, and friendship.

## Discussion questions

1. You might take turns reading the viewpoints aloud. Which view sounds right to you? Why? Is anything left out?
2. How has your experience affected your feelings about this issue?
3. How do you think the adults in your life would feel about these viewpoints?
4. What is being done in your school or community to

### What can we do? Ideas for further discussion and action

There are many ways we can help address racial problems.

*As individuals,* we can examine our own attitudes, and pay attention to how we talk about others who are different. We can challenge other people about their prejudiced remarks. We can treat people as individuals, not stereotypes. We can reach out to people who are different and try to make friends. We can make an effort to learn about other cultures.

*With small groups of people* who care about reducing racial tension, we can get involved in projects, clubs, teams, and organizations where we will meet people from other backgrounds. We can join efforts that work on building bridges between different groups.

*As a community,* we can sponsor projects that welcome all young people in the community. We can organize a monthly dance, or multi-ethnic programs at a youth center or recreation center. We can be part of community service projects that bring different racial groups together and benefit the entire neighborhood. We can sponsor study circles on race relations all over the community.

address problems between groups? What has worked? What's not working well? Why?

5. What are other communities doing? Is another community doing something that we might learn from?
6. What could we do to reduce conflict between groups? How can kids take the lead? Who else should be involved?
7. What are our next steps?

## Session 3b

# How can we reduce violence and make the community a safer place?

### *What some kids are saying*

- ✓ *"In school I've seen violence by teenagers—beatings, people being jumped. I think these things happen because we don't trust each other and we don't know one another."*
- ✓ *"A lot of people turn violent to protect themselves. They'll get into a gang so they won't get messed up by another gang. And it's just a cycle which keeps on getting worse and worse."*
- ✓ *"How come we teenagers can get guns faster than we can get a job?"*

For many kids, fear and violence are daily companions. Teenagers may face violence in their homes, in their schools, or on the streets. Many schools are no longer the safe havens they used to be. Some kids even carry weapons to school because they are afraid of being hassled or beaten up.

Today, many communities are working to "take back the streets." Citizen action, community policing, and neighborhood groups working together have made a big difference in this problem. Young people are critical to the success of these efforts.

The purpose of this session is to talk about violence involving kids, and to find ways to work together to make this a safer place for all of us.

### Six viewpoints

Here are six possible ways to address the problem.

**Viewpoint #1 — We need to punish troublemakers.** We need to get tougher on the small number of young people who are committing most of the violent acts in our community. Kids who don't straighten out should be locked up. We also need better protection against violence. There must be more security in schools, and harsher punishments for those who break the rules. We need more police in high-crime areas. We need laws allowing police to stop and frisk young people who look suspicious.

**Viewpoint #2 — We should make it harder to get guns.** Young people are no different today than they were 20 or 40 years ago. Teenagers have always hung out in groups, and gangs have been around for a long time. What's different is that instead of using fists or knives, kids now can get access to handguns and even automatic weapons. We need to pass and enforce strict gun control laws, and we should educate everyone about the dangers of guns.

**Viewpoint #3 — We need to deal with drugs and alcohol.** Many violent crimes are committed by people who are drunk or on drugs. We need to prevent substance abuse, enforce bans on sales of alcohol to minors, and provide more "chem-free" activities for youth. Also, we need to crack down on the people who deal drugs, since the drug trade is usually tied to violence and crime.

**What are the causes of violence in our community? Some ideas**

- Violence happens because families are under stress and breaking down.
- Violence is growing because our culture — movies, music, TV — glorifies it and shows it as a way to solve problems.
- Violence is on the rise because we are too soft on troublemakers.
- Violence grows in the poor parts of cities where crime and drugs are common.
- Violence is getting worse because it's easier for kids to get guns.

*Of these reasons, is there one or more that you agree with? Why? Is anything left out?*

**Viewpoint #4 — We need to learn how to resolve problems peacefully.** Violence is everywhere, so it can seem natural to use violence in a conflict unless we learn how to stop problems before they become fights. Kids and adults must have the chance to learn communication skills, conflict resolution techniques, and peer mediation. We need violence prevention education in all our schools and communities.

**Viewpoint #5 — We need to protect ourselves.** Things are out of control, especially in many large cities, and kids can't always count on adults for protection. Every young person should take self-defense programs such as martial arts. Young people should carry a pocket-size alarm, or a defensive "pepper" spray.

**Viewpoint #6 — We need to deal with poverty.** All the things that happen more frequently in high-poverty areas — family disruption, high drug and alcohol use, overburdened schools, joblessness — make these areas a "powder keg" for violence. We need to do more than rescue individual children who live in these areas; we have to change their environments.

## Discussion questions

1. Take turns reading the viewpoints. Of the six views, is there one, or a combination, that you agree with? Why? Is there a point of view left out?
2. How has your experience affected your feelings about this issue?
3. Why do you think violence happens in this community?
4. What could we do in our community to make it safer? Is anything already being done? What's working? Why or why not?
5. Is another community doing something that we might learn from?
6. How can young people take leadership around this issue?
7. What are our next steps?

### What can we do? Ideas for further discussion and action

*As individuals,* we can practice good communication and conflict resolution skills, so that arguments don't escalate into violence. We can get help with substance abuse, or work in a prevention program. We can join a neighborhood watch. We can learn mediation skills to use at school or work.

*As small groups of concerned citizens,* we can address community violence by organizing programs that bring different people together on common projects. We can volunteer to take part in (or help to start) community policing efforts. We can raise money to sponsor athletic activities for teenagers and young adults. We can ask local media outlets to review their programming for violent messages.

*As a community,* we can address violence by sponsoring public education campaigns on violence. We can ask our schools to incorporate curricula to prevent or reduce violence. We can sponsor summer internships and youth programs. We can organize intergenerational community service projects. We can organize study circles on violence all over the community.

## Session 3c

# How can we promote healthy and responsible dating relationships?

### *What some kids are saying*

- ✓ *"Even though we've had sex education in health classes, my boyfriend and I don't always use a condom."*
- ✓ *"I want to be good friends with a guy and have that be O.K."*
- ✓ *"No way I can ask my new girlfriend if she's been tested for AIDS, even though I know she's dated a lot of guys."*
- ✓ *"Last night my boyfriend told me I was too fat, and then pushed me around."*

Friendships and relationships become more and more important in the years between childhood and adulthood. Our social life has a strong impact on how we feel about ourselves and the people around us, and can affect us for the rest of our lives.

What we usually don't think of is the way our friendships and relationships affect the whole community. But, more and more, "relationship problems" are becoming "community problems," such as dating violence, teen pregnancy, and AIDS.

**Dating relationships among young people are more and more in the public eye. Why?**

- Unmarried teens are having children. A large number of these young mothers spend years on welfare, and fathers are often absent.
- Because of AIDS, having unprotected sex can be a life-and-death situation.
- Unhealthy relationships among young people can set up long-term patterns of abuse, poor self-image, eating disorders, and self-destructive behaviors that can carry into adulthood and marriage.
- Add alcohol or other drugs to a social or dating situation and the chance of making bad choices gets higher.

*Is there an issue here, or combination of issues, that you feel are problems for the young people in our community?*

In this session we will talk about how we can have healthy social lives, friendships, and dating relationships, and how our relationships affect community life.

## Five viewpoints

Here are some approaches to developing good social and dating relationships.

**Viewpoint #1 — Good social relationships begin with strong families.** The family is the basic unit of society. It is the best place for kids to learn about loving and respectful relationships. If we support and strengthen families, we will have young people who can relate to others in healthy ways.

**Viewpoint #2 — We should focus on facts, openness, and respect.** The best way to promote good social and dating relationships is to offer complete education about sexuality, gender roles, and respectful behavior from early childhood on. Every student should be required to take a course on human sexuality that teaches communication skills and the value of mutual respect. The course should also include facts about sexually-transmitted diseases.

### Facts and trends

- **Unmarried teens who have children** are less likely to enter the labor force; their children are more likely to live in poverty. Children born to teenage mothers are more likely to drop out of school, give birth out of wedlock, divorce or separate, or live on welfare (*1996 Kids Count Data Book*).
- **What contributes to teens having babies?** Here are four common factors: 1) poverty; 2) not doing well in school and having low hopes for achievement; 3) troubled family life; and 4) substance abuse and behavioral problems (*1996 Kids Count Data Book*).
- **HIV infection** is growing faster than ever before among young people between the ages of 15 and 25. Worse yet, it may be 4 to 8 years before sexually active young people discover they are infected (Centers for Disease Control, AIDS Hotline, 1996).

**Viewpoint #3 — Good friendships and dating relationships start with good values.** When young people belong to organizations that teach strong values — such as churches, synagogues, youth organizations, or summer camps — they are better able to make good decisions about friends, social life, and dating.

**Viewpoint #4 — Good friendships and dating relationships need support from a strong community.** Schools, social service agencies, churches, and other community organizations can work together to create an environment that promotes and supports healthy relationships. They can create welcoming places for young people. They can also sponsor activities where young people can meet others in the community.

**Viewpoint #5 — We should make sure kids have adult supervision and guidance.** Parents should be involved in their kids' lives, and know where their kids are and who they're with. Young people need to know that there are adults — their parents or others they can trust — whom they can talk to and confide in.

## Discussion questions

1. Take turns reading the viewpoints. Which of the five points of view makes the most sense to you? Why? Are there other viewpoints left out?
2. How has your experience affected your thinking?
3. What is a "good" friend, or a "good" dating relationship? If you were answering this question for a younger brother or sister, what would you say?

### What can we do? Ideas for further discussion and action

*As individuals*, we can practice appropriate, respectful behaviors towards others of both genders. We can decide not to be part of activities that are unhealthy or unsafe. We can treat others in ways that build self-esteem.

*As small groups of people*, we can work with organizations to provide education and support programs for families and young people. We can help start a teen center, or volunteer at a youth center that is already in the community. We can organize community activities that are youth-oriented and chem-free.

*As a community*, we can show that young people are a priority by dedicating time and space to after-school activities for kids. Businesses, churches, synagogues, mosques, schools, libraries, YWCAs, YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, and other organizations can provide social opportunities that are safe and fun.

4. Do you think the young people in our community have good social and dating experiences? How could they be better?
5. How do these relationships affect the community as a whole? Are we addressing the problems that are making dating relationships a more public concern?
6. What could we do in our own community to improve the social lives of kids? Is anything already being done? What has been successful? Why or why not?
7. Is another community doing something that we might learn from?
8. How can kids take leadership around this issue?
9. What are our next steps?

## Session 3d

# How can we deal with substance abuse?

### *What some kids are saying*

- ✓ *"When I'm with my friends, I always end up drinking too much."*
- ✓ *"It's hard being the designated driver when everybody else is wasted."*
- ✓ *"Marijuana is a natural substance. Nobody ever died from it, even when they smoke everyday!"*
- ✓ *"I don't use drugs or alcohol, and because of that, I sometimes have a hard time fitting in."*
- ✓ *"I drink, but I'm not going to do it like my dad does."*

After several years of decline, the use of drugs — alcohol, tobacco, and illegal substances — among kids is once again on the rise. Beer and marijuana are used by many high school students, and even some middle schoolers. There is binge drinking on college campuses and at high school parties. Drug-related incidents, including overdosing among teenagers, are commonplace in many communities.

The use of alcohol and other drugs often plays a key role in violent crime, rape, suicide, car accidents, unsafe sex, and family-related violence. With ten million alcohol drinkers under the age of 21, including 4.4 million binge drinkers, substance abuse is recognized as a serious problem affecting our young people and our communities.

In this session, we'll talk about substance abuse, how it affects our community, and what to do about it.

### Five viewpoints

Many individuals, organizations and communities are working to address substance abuse problems. Here are several approaches.

**Viewpoint #1 — We should make sure kids and families who need substance abuse treatment have an opportunity to get it.** Intervention and treatment programs, substance abuse counselors, and support groups should be readily available to everyone who needs them. People who work with kids should be aware of the issue, and help them get the treatment they need.

**Viewpoint #2 — We need early education and prevention programs.** The only way to get a handle on this is to teach young people about the dangers of substance abuse. Kids need to know the hard facts about drugs and alcohol, and how they affect their bodies and their health. In the face of media that glorify drug and alcohol use, kids need to learn to say no and to understand why.

**Viewpoint #3 — We need plenty of chemical-free activities so that kids can have fun without using.** When young people are busy with their friends in fun activities, they experience the "natural highs" that come with health, physical activity, and personal achievement, and are less attracted to alcohol and other drugs.

**Viewpoint #4 — We need to crack down on substance abuse.** We can make a difference in kids' lives by sending a strong and consistent message through our school policies and legal system: underage, illegal use of substances will not be tolerated. Schools, parents, young people, police, and the whole community need to act together on this. Kids who break the rules should be

## Why is there a substance abuse problem among young people? Some ideas

- **Young people are naturally curious, and don't realize that occasional use can turn into abuse.** Kids are inexperienced with alcohol and other drugs, and can easily get in over their heads.

- **Young people abuse substances because "everyone does it, and it feels good."** Young people use alcohol and other drugs to fit in with their friends and be part of the group.

- **Young people abuse drugs when they are bored, lonely, or depressed.** The transition to adulthood can be confusing and emotional. Substances provide an escape.

- **Young people who abuse substances are imitating the adults around them.** It is unrealistic to think that kids won't abuse alcohol and other drugs when their parents and other adults do.

- **Young people abuse drugs to get attention.** Abusing substances is a sure way to get parents' attention.

- **Young people abuse drugs because adults fail to control their kids.** Society used to be stricter about drug and alcohol abuse, but now a lot of adults have given up.

*Rank these according to what you think are the most common reasons. Which views are closest to your own? Are any reasons left out?*

suspended from school, and punished.

**Viewpoint #5 — We should make sure that kids have adult supervision and guidance.** Parents should know where their kids are and who they're with. They should also be aware of the warning signs of substance abuse. Young people need to know that there are adults — their parents, or others they can trust — whom they can talk to and confide in. They also need to know that a lot is expected of them, and that *they* are the only ones who can meet those expectations.

## Discussion questions

1. Take turns reading the views aloud. Which approach do you think is best? Why? Is anything important left out of these approaches?
2. Why do you think some young people in our community abuse substances?
3. What could we do here to reduce substance abuse? Is anything already being done? Is it working? Why or why not?
4. Is another community doing something that we can learn from?
5. How can young people take leadership around this issue?
6. What are our next steps?

## What can we do? Ideas for further discussion and action

*As individuals,* we can get smart about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs so that we know what they do to the body. We can be part of preventive programs in schools, churches, and youth organizations. We can write letters to school and police officials to offer support and suggestions for policies.

*As small groups of concerned citizens,* we can organize parent-student groups to learn about substances and come up with ideas to address the problem. We can volunteer to help with chem-free activities for families and young people. We can take part in workshops and programs that show the damage to health that drugs can cause. We can help create programs where young people can work as peer counselors with others who have a problem with substance abuse.

*As a community,* we can pass laws to punish underage use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. We can support law enforcement efforts to eliminate drug traffic from the community. We can lobby businesses to hold drug and alcohol prevention programs for their employees. We can monitor small businesses to make sure they are not selling tobacco or alcohol to minors, and support them when they say no.

## Session 4

# Making a difference: What can we do now?

The purpose of this session is to talk about the next steps we can take to make a difference on youth issues in our community. Some of those steps can be taken individually, and others can be taken as part of this group or other community groups.

### Ideas for individual action

- Make a habit of raising the issues you care about in conversations with the adults and young people in your life. Ask them what they think, and find out what is already being done in the community.
- Get involved in an ongoing group or program where you can meet others and talk about the issues facing youth in the community. Some examples of these programs:
  - ✓ a youth program or teen center
  - ✓ a church or synagogue youth group
  - ✓ a club or group at school
  - ✓ a teen support group or discussion group
- Be a leader in a youth program. For example:
  - ✓ get trained as a peer mediator or peer leader
  - ✓ run for student council
  - ✓ work on the student newspaper
  - ✓ take a leadership role in planning programs at a youth program or teen center
- Join a community organization. For example:
  - ✓ get involved in your local neighborhood group
  - ✓ help out in a political campaign
  - ✓ volunteer for community service at an organization that is dealing with the issues that concern you most
  - ✓ do an internship for an organization that provides services or does advocacy
- Be a leader in a community organization. For example:
  - ✓ join a committee at your church or synagogue
  - ✓ participate in an organization that serves youth

- ✓ offer to serve on the board of directors of a community organization
- ✓ help plan youth programs in your city, or sit on the youth services commission

## What you can do as part of a community organization

- Help organize study circles on youth issues.
- Facilitate a study circle in a program you've helped organize.
- Sponsor a youth support group.
- Help develop school programs such as peer mediation, conflict resolution, or peer leadership.
- Help organize a basketball or soccer tournament that will bring together young people from many neighborhoods.
- Help develop a mentoring program in which adults and older youth can work with younger people and children.
- Help start a youth center. If there is already a youth center in your community, help develop new programs or groups there, or support existing programs.
- Help organize a youth summit for your community.

## Possible next steps for this study circle

- Continue to meet as a study circle to learn more about what's going on in the community, or to focus on specific issues.
- Put into action some of the ideas you talked about in other sessions.
- Meet with other study circles to exchange action ideas that have come out of the groups.
- Pair up with another study circle and continue talking. Consider pairing with a group from a different neighborhood, faith, or ethnic background.

## Discussion questions

1. Now that the study circle is over, what next steps do you want to take? What motivates you the most to take these steps? What is your

greatest obstacle to taking action? What would you need to overcome that?

2. Think back to some of the visions, challenges, and issues you have discussed in the previous sessions. In light of those, what does the community need to do? What role could you play? Would any of the suggestions for action here help with those challenges and problems?
3. Do any of the programs mentioned here exist in our community? What has been successful? Do we need to find out more about what programs exist, or about what they do?
4. What roles could kids play in our community to make a positive difference? How could kids and adults work together better?
5. What resources are in the community to help set up programs to engage youth more in public life and to develop leadership skills? Do you know how to get in touch with them?
6. How can people and organizations work together better on youth issues?
7. For you, what was the most important idea that came out of this group?

## A comparison of dialogue and debate

Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward common understanding.

*Debate is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.*

In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal.

*In debate, winning is the goal.*

In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement.

*In debate, one listens to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its arguments.*

Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.

*Debate affirms a participant's own point of view.*

Dialogue reveals assumptions for reevaluation.

*Debate defends assumptions as truth.*

Dialogue causes introspection on one's own position.

*Debate causes critique of the other position.*

Dialogue opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.

*Debate defends one's own positions as the best solution and excludes other solutions.*

Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude – an openness to being wrong and an openness to change.

*Debate creates a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right.*

In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, knowing that other peoples' reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.

*In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.*

Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.

*Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.*

In dialogue, one searches for basic agreements.

*In debate, one searches for glaring differences.*

In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other positions.

*In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other position.*

Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend.

*Debate involves a countering of the other position without focusing on feelings or relationships, and often belittles or deprecates the other person.*

Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer, and that together, they can put them into a workable solution.

*Debate assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it.*

Dialogue remains open-ended.

*Debate implies a conclusion.*

Adapted from a paper prepared by Shelley Berman, which was based on discussions of the Dialogue Group of the Boston Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR). Other members included Lucile Burt, Dick Mayo-Smith, Lally Stowell, and Gene Thompson. For more information on ESR's programs and resources using dialogue as a tool for dealing with controversial issues, call the national ESR office at (617) 492–1764.

## Ground rules for useful discussions

This section offers some brief suggestions for useful discussions about social and political issues.

There are no sure-fire rules, but applying some basic principles will make your study circle more productive, satisfying, and enjoyable. Though many of these ground rules seem common-sensical, we all know that in practice they are not so commonly applied!

- Listen carefully to others. Try to really understand what they are saying and respond to it, especially when their ideas differ from your own. Try to avoid building your own arguments in your head while others are talking.
- Think together about what you want to get out of your conversation.
- Be open to changing your mind; this will help you really listen to others' views.
- When disagreement occurs, keep talking. Explore the disagreement. Search for the common concerns beneath the surface. Above all, be civil.
- Value one another's experiences, and think about how they have contributed to your thinking.
- Help to develop one another's ideas. Listen carefully and ask clarifying questions.
- Don't waste time arguing about points of fact. For the time being, you may need to agree to disagree and then move on. You might want to check out the facts before your next conversation.
- Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the conversation.

***The Busy Citizen's Discussion Guide: Youth Issues, Youth Voices*** is designed to help you have productive conversations on key community issues which involve and affect youth. It can serve as the basis for informal discussions whenever you have the opportunity to talk, or it can serve as a handout for more formal discussion programs. The booklet is balanced in its presentation of ideas, and offers suggestions for discussing several difficult aspects of these problems.

The Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC), producer of the Busy Citizen's Discussion Guide, is a project of Topsfield Foundation, Inc., a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan foundation dedicated to advancing deliberative democracy and improving the quality of public life in the United States. SCRC carries out this mission by promoting the use of small-group, democratic, highly participatory discussions known as study circles.

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